CHAPTER – TWO

PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN INDIA AND ABROAD

To conduct wars, to promote religion, to cultivate art and literature and to maintain administrative staff, enormous resources are needed. According to R.S. Sarma, ‘these were apparently provided by the peasantry’.¹ This peasantry originated within society then when agriculture became main provider of food. Agriculture gave a family more time to spend on cultivation and harvesting. This way, the food-gatherers turned into food-producers and family became a social organization. There was no agriculture because seed-plants were realized in the jungles. A good example of pre-history of agriculture was ‘Chopni Mando, a Megalithic community of Vindhyan foothills who consumed wild rice’.² The Neolithic revolution brought with it the domesticated plants and two crop-zones within India. The first zone is within the period of 6500 – 4500 B.C. in the Belan valley and the second is within the period of 6ᵗʰ to 3ʳᵈ millennium B.C. in the Bolan Pass.

A notable stage in human progress marked with the domestication of plants and animals though a full-fledged agricultural revolution was yet to come. Till then there was no trace of plough and ‘cultivation might still be a continuation of food-gathering’.³ The first urban and agricultural revolution took place in India coincidently in the Indus basin (Harappa) within 2600 – 1800 B.C. Indus agriculture, no doubt, rested on plough cultivation. The Indus people sowed seeds in the flood-plains in November and reaped their harvest of wheat and barley in April, before the next flood. ‘No hoe or ploughshare has been discovered but the furrows discovered in the pre-Harappan phase at Kalibangan indicate that the fields were ploughed in Rajasthan during the Harappan period’.⁴ Scholars believe that in olden times, Sind received copious rainfall and ‘the presence of a great river must have made the problem of irrigation easy solution’.⁵ Establishment of two harvest system, agriculture as a full time occupation and peasantry as a social class – thus the Indus culture gave India her first peasantry which was firm and settled.

The Aryans directly succeeded the Indus culture. Rigvedic people practised agriculture. Reference to term ‘Krishi’ occurs rarely in Rigveda. ‘The well known term
‘hala’ for the plough is not found but two other terms for plough- ‘Langala’ and ‘Sira’ - are mentioned. Ploughs were drawn by oxen and ploughshares of wood were used for cultivation. The early Aryans also possessed some knowledge of season which promoted agriculture’.  

The Aryan technology was still chalcolithic and the Rigvedic ‘ayasa’ is generally thought to mean copper, not iron. Agriculture was primitive but there is no doubt about its wide prevalence. The Satapatha Brahmana speaks at length about the ploughing rituals. According to ancient legends, ‘Janaka- the king of Videha and Sita’s father lent his hand to the plough. In those days, even kings and princes did not hesitate to take to manual labour. Balarama, Krishna’s brother, was called Haladhara (wielder of the plough). Eventually, ploughing was assigned to the lower orders and prohibited for the upper castes.  

The Aryans seemed to have regarded with scorn the mound-based (ditch-based) agriculture of their enemies and therefore, they brought certain changes in agricultural conditions. The Aryans method of ‘preserving cattle and cultivations’ were learnt by the tribal peasantry.  

There is no doubt that the surplus still came from the peasants. The peasants were the Kshetrapati (master of the field). But all peasants were not Kshetrapatis as there was division and variations among them. The Varna scheme of the Rigvedic hymns seem to reflect the deep division of the peasantry into free ‘viz’ and the servile ‘dasyus’ who transmuted as Vaisyas and Sudras respectively the third and fourth varnas. The ‘Dasas’ were in the lowest level. After the Indus basin, the long transition in the history of Indian peasantry began in the Gangetic basin. The first clearings began in the Gangetic basin with the appearance of copper. ‘The copper Hoard People’ established few settlements in the Doab and Rohila-Khand during the earlier half of the second millennium and extended up to western Bihar. They, like the Rigvedic people, ‘raised rice and barley but not wheat’. Two pulses, gram and khesari, also appeared with black gram.  

Arrival of iron in the upper Gangetic basin took place around 1000 B.C. and it was a boost to agriculture and industry and also to human civilization.  

Agricultural conditions in the Gangetic basin were vastly different from those of the Indus basin. The cultivators shifted from one field to another virgin land and thus they
improved their yield in the Gangetic plains. The ‘Jhum’ method required collective action which led to the formation of tribes like the Sakya who were peasants. In the late Vedic and Brahmana literature, there was reference of ‘ploughs drawn by six, eight or even twelve oxen’. This might be because of ‘hard nature of the soil full of roots and stone’.10

By the middle of the first millennium B.C., long period of agricultural penetration towards east had created a complex social problem. Emergence of Mahajanapadas with the kings’ powers restricted by powerful aristocracies and Brahmanas created the problem. They had control over large areas of land but paid no levy to the king. It was the peasant alone who paid the levy. That’s why the king was called ‘the devourer of peasants’.11

For almost 500 years (from around 500 B.C.) there was tremendous acceleration in the process of change which universalized peasants’ production and created a caste-divided peasantry. Extensive use of iron was adapted to clear fresh land and to break stony ground with iron-axes and iron-plough shares which according to Gordon Childe ‘cheap iron democratized agriculture’. Growing multiplicity of crops from 6th century B.C. contributed to the growth of the urban markets resulting from the rise of towns. ‘The new method of cultivation- like rice transplantation, questions of skilled labour and knowledge of both soil and crop all these brought revolutionary change in agriculture from 6th century B.C. onwards’.12

Pressure for surplus extraction reinforced agriculture expansion which led to the establishment of peasant agriculture. The peasants were the basic tax-payers and in 5th and 4th centuries B.C. and finally, the Mauryan Empire intensified the tax-drive. According to Megasthenes, the peasants paid to the king a land tribute. According to Kautilya, Sudra Karshakas (Sudra cultivators) and other lower classes were more amenable to exploitation. The Mauryan period did witness the emergence of fairly well-organised agrarian economy- in the upper and middle valleys of Ganga and the dissemination of this knowhow to outlying regions of the subcontinent thus inaugurating ‘a phase of peasantisation’ in this part of the world.13

One exceptional case which was widely prevalent in Mauryan and Post-Mauryan period was that some peasants (owners) rented or leased-out the water from their tanks and ponds to the needy. But for that, the needy had to give a stipulated produce. Of
course, permission was required for that from the state. The peasants who had enough resources to mobilize men and money could own irrigation works. Their control over water must have led to the establishment of some sort of 'an exploitative relationship between the rich and the poor peasants in the villages'.

The lord or swami leased out the land to Karshakas (peasants) rather than he tilled it under his own direct management. But in second century B.C. as Patanjali mentioned, lord or swami supervised ploughing by five labourers.

The Kushana rulers were more interested in tolls from trade. They paid probably little attention to 'the organisation of agricultural production' and some organisations in rural areas would play an important role in this context.

On the other hand, deliberate attempts were made to extend the arable land by means of grants. It was realized that barren tracts could be of no use to the owners unless these were made cultivable and so 'grants were made to priests and temples with the object of bringing such lands under cultivation'. The social change disintegrated the Janapadas (tribes) and Jatis (castes) replaced Janapadas. The Janapadas naturally broke-up into separate segments while occupational Jatis were formed. Not a single peasant Jati but a large number of peasant Jatis resulted from this break-down of the Janapada-system. The peasants were relegated to a Sudra-Jati. According to Manu, the Hindu law-maker, 'agriculture was one of the Vaishya occupations and the 'labourer in tillage' was Sudra'. But Kautilya's theory of Sudra Karshakas (Sudra-peasants) more properly defined 'the actual status of the peasants'. By the 7th century A.D. Yuan Chwang classified the peasants simply as 'Sudras'.

The co-existence between agriculture and hunting broke down during the long-transition in the Gangetic basin due to the increasing size of population in the forest. The raising of leguminous crops reduced the villagers' dependence on animal meat or fish and growing use of cotton affected the demand for animal skins. The areas of forest that the hunters had to have for their subsistence started to dwindle, which jeopardized peace and solitude hitherto prevailed in the region. As a result, 'clash for subsistence among several groups' became inevitable.

The peasants searched for more land but obstruction came from the forest people. As a result, they had to entertain a bitter hostility towards the forest people. The peasants
had a bitter disdain towards the hunting tribes of the forests. The prejudice against the animal killings was likely to have derived in much larger measure from the peasantry. Edicts of Asoka and the Buddhist texts explain this. Even the occupation of peasants too was not spared and it was termed as ‘sinful and lowly one as the plough with its iron point injures the earth and the creatures living in it’. According to I-tsing, the sage is said to have forbidden the monks from engaging in cultivation because this involved destroying lives by ploughing and watering field.19

Gradually, ‘the tribal moorings with their customs and superstitions collapsed and peasant became an invincible part of society. The literal significance of the name ‘Krishna’ (Krishi, Krihsak, Krishti, Krishna, Keshava) and the anecdotes of his childhood proclaim clearly the rustic elements in the great Bhakti-cult. A kind of peasant Hinduism, thus – developed.20

In its early social evolution, southern India followed an independent line of development down to the Mauryan conquest in 3rd century B.C. The plough appeared in south in the second millennium B.C. with a basically Neolithic culture. Though various crops were raised but rice and bajra-millet began to be cultivated after the coming of iron. This type of agriculture implied the existence of peasantry from the late Neolithic times.

The arrival of north-culture on the south along with its effects was important. An important index of the contemporary status of the peasants in India is that the peasants were classed as Sudras and it is difficult to admit that there was ever an alliance between the Brahmanas and peasants which served as ‘the keystone of local south Indian societies’.21

Kosambi propounded a somber view on the cultural and economic performance of entire period of first millennium and described it deadlier than any invasion. Agriculture declined during this period and the concept of peasant society became a ‘constant factor’ in accordance of Burton Stein’s Postulation.22

The Sundarsana Lake in Saurashtra and its history from the Mauryas to the Guptas marked the beginning of the recorded history of tank and bund irrigation. The construction of irrigation tanks seemed to have become well-established in the south by the Chola times and contributed to the extension of cultivation throughout the Indian peninsula. During the first thousand years after Christ, agricultural production increased
considerably. Every step was taken to improve peasant production and agrarian slave became superfluous during this period.

There was a considerable degree of stratification within the peasantry. There were large numbers who were 'mere share-croppers on the fields of others'. Manu says that 'the owner of the field' have priority over the actual tiller. Yajnavalkya supports this when he says that the owner of the field has the right to assign it to a cultivator of his choice. 23

From the 4th century A.D. onward, the donees took land on lease to cultivate or get it cultivated subject to certain bindings. Usually, the Buddhist monasteries leased out their lands to share croppers but gave nothing except sometime oxen. Some monasteries even did not divide the produce.

Some segments of the peasantry imply a serf-like status of the peasantry. According to Manu, Kshetrikasya (cultivator) employed bhriya (labour) in his field. The Milindapanho's (1st century B.C. to 5th A.D.) husbandman, Kamasutra’s (4th century) 'youngson of a peasant' who employed Vistikarma (forced labour) in his Kshetraganaha (cultivation field) all these reveal 'exploitation of peasants by peasants' in ancient Indian societies. 24

This type of peasant-stratification raises questions about the real nature of the village community of India. Private property might not have arisen due to the abundance of land. In 9th and 10th centuries, much of the land might have been held to be vested with the community. But this does not imply lack of stratification. 'In the earliest village community, only the upper stratum mattered in the community, where power lay in the hands of the non-peasant landowners'. 25

Economic autonomy of the village developed once agriculture had been universalized by the iron-pointed plough. According to Kosambi, Post-Mauryan villages gave surplus in kind to the rulers while the village became self-sufficient. This first developed in north and then in the south. 'Kosambi talks of the growth of virtually self-contained villages and a close village for the Gupta period. Sharma sees villages and towns as more self-sufficient between the 3rd and 9th century' A.D. 26

The benefits of the dominance came mainly through the fiscal system. A large part of the surplus had to be alienated by the village in payment of taxes. The strong in
the villages used to shift the burden on to the weak. Tax amounting normally to \( \frac{1}{6} \) of the produce had little reality behind it. This was prescribed as the maximum for ‘bali’ in the Smritis but the Arthasastra has prescribed bali and sadabhaga (\( \frac{1}{8} \)) as separate taxes. The Rummindai Pillar inscription of Asoka confirms the existence of this double tax. He remitted the bali for the holy village and continued the other tax at the reduced rate of athbahaga (\( \frac{1}{8} \)). Megasthenes’ accounts also speak of two taxes - land tribute and a land tax of \( \frac{1}{4} \) of the produce. The two taxes occur in Rudradaman’s Girnar inscription of 150 A.D., whereafter there is ‘an increasing multiplicity of taxes’.

It is said that the agrarian taxation was at higher rates in Mauryan days than in Gupta days which is hardly justified. The increasing number of taxes like bhaga-bhoga appearing in inscriptions indicates a real increase in the fiscal burden on the peasants. A passage ascribed to Varahamihira (6th century A.D.) describes the sight of ‘desolate villages abandoned by peasants owing to the oppression of the bhogapatis’ (tax-collectors). Agriculture was the main occupation of the Rashtrakutas of Manyakheta (753-973 A.D.) and it received encouragement from the kings. The dynasty ruled over Karmataka for about 250 years enjoying political supremacy over Deccan.

The villages granted to the Brahmanas by the Pallavas were exempted from payment of all taxes and forced labour to the state. This implied that these were collected from the cultivators by the Brahmanas for their personal use and profits. Thus ‘the Brahmanas emerged as an important class at the expense of the peasantry’, from whom they collected their dues directly. Land grants seem to have ‘stimulated agrarian expansion under the Pallavas in South Andhra and North Tamilnadu from the end of the 3rd century A.D.onward but they seem to have adversely affected the peasants’.

While tax extraction had an immediate terror for the peasantry, its mode of distribution also affected it in the long run. Sharma’s theory of ‘Indian Feudalism’ rests essentially on the mode of alienation of the tax resources by the rulers.

A more important source of feudalism was the decay of commerce and decline of towns, which seems to have continued down to the 11th century A.D. This synchronized with a ruralisation of the ruling class and the creation of hereditary tax-collecting potentates placed one over the other in some hierarchical order.
Cavalry supported such dispersed political power. Chariots were obsolete in India and when the Arab faced Dahir in battle in 712 – 713 A.D., the ruler of Sind was accompanied by sons of kings numbering 5,000 horsemen. These horsemen were the knights of Indian feudalism. The horsemen represented the armed and warrior clans and their members dispersed among the villages to extract taxes and keep the peasants subjugated. The power and rights that these feudal warriors carved out for them long survived the polities within which they had originated. The Zamindar class of medieval India, continuing into modern times was created out of these deeply entrenched elements.

II

Peasant movements in ancient India:

The revolt led by the Kalabhra in the 6th century A.D. is an important event in the history of South India. They seem to have been a tribal people who captured power at the cost of the Cholas and ruled for seventy five years. N.K. Sastri does not have any good words for them and condemned them ‘as the scourge of humanity and enemies of civilisation’. The Kalabhras are called evil rulers and they were charged with resumption of Brahmadeya lands. They overthrew many kings and established their hold on the Tamilnadu. The revolt was a powerful peasant protest directed against the landed Brahmanas. They put an end to the Brahmadeya rights granted to the Brahmanas in numerous villages. Their revolt was so wide-spread that it could be quelled only through the joint efforts of the Pandyas, the Pallavas and the Chalukyas of Badami. By the last quarter of the 6th century A.D., according to a tradition, the Kalabhras had imprisoned the Chola, the Pandya and the Chera kings, which underlines how formidable their revolt was. The confederacy of the kings formed against the Kalabhras, who had revoked the land grants made to the Brahmanas, shows that the revolt was directed against the existing social and political order in the south. The Pandyas brought an end to the so-called dark period inaugurated by the Kalabhras.

Sometime peasants took advantage of royal visits to complain to the king. For example, a large number of rural folk came out to welcome Harsha when his army was passing through the country side but at the same time, they complained to him against the
oppression of the bhogpatis (tax-collectors) who had been placed in enjoyment of revenue from the villages.32

Sometime the officials of the Government found it difficult to collect taxes which created problem to remunerate priests, warriors and officials. To remove the problems, land grants were made on a large scale leading to the aversion in production. Some land-grants indicated the possibility of conflicts. 'A ninth century grant from Garhwal advised the people not to create upadava (trouble) for the grantee and considered disobedience to be ‘mahadroha’ (great rebellion).33

It was another form of protest particularly in south India. By killing themselves in public, people registered their protest. A dancing girl threw herself from the temple tower to assert the right of her relatives to plough the land assigned to her for her maintenance. This method was adopted by the peasants of south India in protest against their exploitation by the landlords.34

The Brahmavaivarta Purana for the first time mentioned that the Kaivartas were ‘a mixed caste born of Kshatriya father and Vaishya mother’.35 Traditionally ‘a low mixed Jati (caste) of boat men, they held plots of land in North Bengal’.36 They were divided into two sub-communities. One section took to agriculture and another pursued fishing. They were a powerful war-like community of North Bengal who cultivated land. Some of them were powerful feudal chiefs.

The Buddhist Palas restricted the fishing occupation of the Kaivartas due to their faith in non-violence, which alienated the Kaivartas. This is propounded by Dr. Binoy Chandra Sen. A literacy account Ramacharita says that upon being subjected to heavy taxation, they revolted under Divya. Fighting naked with bows and arrows and riding on buffaloes, Divya headed the revolt against king Mahipala II. Finally the king was killed and Divya captured the throne of Varendri (modern Rajshahi district). The revolt had, by nature, a feudal character. The social significance of the Kaivarta revolt is that a non-Kshatriya caste revolted against the upper caste rule of the Palas, who were probably Kshatriyas.

Some dreadful revolts between the landlords and the peasants rocked south in the 11th and the 12th centuries A.D.. The peasants of Andhra and Karnataka launched armed
attacks against the landlord (Brahmanas) and the landlords in retaliation burnt many villages and crops.\textsuperscript{37}

**Peasant movements in medieval India:**

The intrusion of Islam into Indian history opened the gates for the admission of technique from external sources. There were certain improvements in agricultural tools and methods which can be ascribed to the medieval centuries. The medieval land tax, *Kharaj* or *mal*, came into its own with Alauddin Khalji (1296–1316A.D). Until then, except in some localities, the Sultans or their assignees had taken the *Kharaj* as 'a kind of tribute extorted from the chiefs of the defeated regimes'.\textsuperscript{38}

The imposition of land-tax remoulded the relations of the peasants with their superiors. The land tax was no longer seen in the nature of tribute but as levy directly assessable upon each cultivator whether he was a *Khot* or other. Authorities forced the peasants (says a 14\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. document) to cultivate the land and it was asserted on various occasions during the Mughal period. Finally, if the peasants failed to pay the tax, they would become 'subject to raids and enslavement by the king's troops'.\textsuperscript{39}

Land sometime brings power, honour and prestige to its owner. 'Control overland' was a matter of social prestige in an essentially feudal society.\textsuperscript{39}

The hereditary magnates of the days of Indian feudalism, after an inevitable process of conflict, confusion of rights and nomenclature, obtained the universal designation 'zamindar' in the Mughal Empire. Thus, a triangular relationship came to exist between the peasantry, the zamindars and the ruling class. The fact is that in medieval India, the surplus was extracted mainly for consumption by the king and his revenue assignees. The cash nexus appears to have been fairly well-established early in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. during Alauddin Khalji's time. In the Mughal Empire, the cash-nexus was almost universal even when the tax was fixed in kind; it was most often commuted into money payments. One important point to be noticed is that Aurangzeb exempted the small peasants (*rezariaya*) from the 'Jiziyaa' in a farman who engaged in cultivation but depended upon entirely on debt for their subsistence, seed and cattle.

The medieval peasantry was beset by a dual exploitation of the ruling class and the zamindars. 'The peasants not only became victims of the zamindars' raids, but
sometime they sought protection from them'. 41 The upper class was enormously wealthy. Wealth was taken from the lower class by force or threat of force in the form of tax or revenue. 1/3 of the produce was taken from the villagers who by the sweat of their brow produced it. They were concerned for revenue but much of the time unconcerned with the plebians. 42

Life for most peasants was a battle for bare survival. The 17th century A.D. witnessed recurring cycles of famine with immense mortalities. Calamities of nature underlined men’s oppression. The heaviest burden that the peasants had to bear was the land tax, an arbitrary confiscation of such a large part of his produce. Payment of the land tax was the root of all major social conflicts involving the peasantry. The land tax represented the principal and the other seemed secondary. 43 The immediate provocation of the peasant uprisings of medieval India seems uniformly to have been the demand for payment of land-revenue.

Numerous instances of peasant protest of Chola period in the first half of the 13th century are found. The strong reaction of the peasants to the oppression of the landlords and occasionally of the royal agents was one of the best examples during the time of Rajaraja-III.

The ponds and tanks formed the chief means of irrigation. Sources unearthed speak that there took place conflict for the possession of tanks. An inscription from Hasan district in Karnataka shows that in 1212 A.D. ‘the chief of Hanche died fighting the people of Kerehalli for a pond’. 44

In the 13th century in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, several violent conflicts between the peasants and the landlords rocked the lands. The peasants launched armed attacks against the Brahma landlords and the landlords in retaliation burnt the whole villages and standing crops and thus carried on their war against peasant-villages.

Widespread rebellion occurred in the Doab about 1330 A.D. when Muhammad Bin Tughluq (1325-51) increased the demand of revenue. Resourceless and weak peasants completely made prostrate but the rich and wealthy peasants turned hostile. The Sultan wanted to punish the Khots and the Muqaddams, by killing or blinding them. Those who were left, gathered bands and fled into the jungles. The troops of the Sultan gheraoed the jungles and slaughtered everyone whom they found. Increasing the revenue
was not a time-suited measure as the region was at the time in the grip of a severe famine. Finally, Bin Tughluq sought to bring change in agriculture. He established an agricultural department (Diwan-i-Kohi) with the object of bringing uncultivated land under the plough cultivation and also under the direct state management. But the experiment, one of the best in the history of the revenue administration, had, therefore, to be given up.

This revolt began mainly at Khuntaghat, situated on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra and within the erstwhile district of Goalpara. It occurred during the time of Jahangir. Sanatan, a headman of the Paiks, emerged as its leader in 1615. The Karoris and the Mustajirs began to tyrannize the peasants and abducted their beautiful daughters and sons for the harem of Muhammad Zaman Tabrizi, the Karori of Khuntaghat Pargana.

Mir Safi, the Diwan and Bakshi of Kamrup, did not pay any attention to the discord and the sedition of the cultivators. The officials were busy increasing the revenue for their own benefits and expenses which added to the discontent of the rayots. The Mughal annexed the north-eastern kingdom and deported the local princes. Their deportation aroused the nobles leading to the outbreak of the revolt at Khuntaghat. The Nobles also joined with the peasant rebels and killed many Mughals. Finally, the rebels were defeated and their forts at Putamari and Takunia were destroyed. Despite that, the peasants of Khuntaghat were not completely subdued. It was at this moment that Sanatan, the Koch chief of the Paiks, began to harass Shaikh Ibrahim, the Karori of Kamrup and declared his revolt in Kamrup. His alliance with the local peasants created terror in the hearts of the Mughals and finally, Mirza Nathan sent proposal for peace but Sanatan gave him several terms which was impossible to accept for him. Sanatan having continued resistance, Mirza Nathan in retaliation razed the neighbouring villages and many food-suppliers were killed. The fortress of the rebels fell to the Mughals; Sanatan was forced to flee, though he continued his resistance against the Mughals.

Khuntaghat was sparked-off once again in 1621. This uprising was popularly known as the “Hathikheda’ uprising. The elephants at that time carried war materials into the jungles of Assam and were used to seize forts in the hill tracts. Because of this, they were important for the army. Mughal army captured elephants and it was one of the duties of the ryots to help them in capturing the elephants. The services of the Palis were
necessary in order to keep the elephants confined within the qamargah (enclosure) while those of the Gharduwari Paiks (auxiliary footman) were required to drive the elephants into the enclosure. The Government officers were sent with special instruction to draft the Gharduwari Paiks from their lands. This practice disrupted the ryots’ work on their own lands and was naturally resented by them.

Baqir Khan, a Mughal officer, carried out a ‘hathikheda’. Some of the elephants escaped while being put in chains. In consequence, the leading drivers of elephants among the Pali and Gharduwari Paiks were sentenced to death and the others were whipped. Baqir Khan ordered ‘either bring the escaped elephants here or pay rupees one thousand for each elephant’. This was the immediate cause of the revolt.

State demanded service for catching elephants. The ryots who trapped and tamed elephants as a profession were first to react and rise in revolt, and were then joined by other oppressed cultivators. It appears that the leadership lay in the hands of ryots of the lower strata.49

The revolt spread to other classes. Bhaba Singh, a Koch noble, became involved in it. The tyranny of Balabhadra, the Hindu Diwan of Mirza Nathan, had roused the peasants to join in the insurrection. The rebels imprisoned the family of Qulij Khan, the Mughal Commander of Koch Bihar. Jahangirbad was raided and stockades were built at Bangaon and Madhupur on either side of the river at Goalpara. Mirza Nathan suppressed this after much trouble. The words of his rival suggests that this revolt was conducted by the ordinary people belonging to a group of fishermen (machwagiri).50

The villagers and cultivators of the other side of the river Jamuna sheltered behind dense jungles and constantly engaged in thieving due to their poor condition. They passed their days with fastnesses and became rebellious and declined to pay land revenue to the Jagirdars. In 1622, Jahangir received the report and an army was thereupon sent to curb the revolt with killings, rapine and enslavement.

The peasant uprising of earlier times formed a prelude to the revolt of the Jat peasants. The Jat peasants under the leadership of a succession of Zamindars revolted with certain aims. The uprising was in formal terms a successful one ending in the establishment of Bharatpur state. It resulted in a very great expansion of Jat Zamindari in the Doab at the expense of other Zamindar clans. A number of upper Jat peasants moved
into the ranks of Zamindars. It had no other sequel as far as the ordinary peasants were concerned. One noticeable feature was that the Zamindars tended to feed on peasant unrest during the 17th century A.D. or merged with the peasants’ revolts in many areas. The revolt of the Jat peasants bears the good example of it. Maratha power also fed on peasant unrest in its formation in the 17th century A.D.

The revolt of the Satnamis (a peasant class) in 1672 A.D. deserves particular notice. It was combined with religious movements emanating from the great monotheistic preaching of the 16th century. In the verses of Kabir and Arjun, God’s faithful worshipper appears as a peasant as well as a village headman. Abul Fazi Mamuri says they were peasants and carried out trade in the manner of Baniyas. Their revolt in 1672 in the Narnaul region shook the Mughal Empire. The Satnamis were defeated and crushed. Though it was a failure, Delhi was affected because the Satnamis interrupted the grain supply of the capital.

The revolt of the Sikh peasants was also like the Satnamis combined with the religious movement and emanated from the great monotheistic preaching of the 16th century. The peasants appeared as rebels under the monotheistic leadership. Their revolt was successful. In spite of its undisputed peasant composition, the community admitted men of the low and menial castes as well. This is an important social movement. But while it lifted sections of the community from a lowly status it did not yet change the major elements of the social order. Even, there is no reference to the oppression of the peasants in Guru Gobind Singh’s Persian poem which was composed in criticism of Aurangzeb. It may be said that though the peasants might fuel a Zamindar’s revolt (Marathas) or might rise in a locality (the Doab) as a caste (Jats) or as a Sect (Satnamis Sikh), they failed to attain recognition of any common objectives that transcended parochial limits.

The fiscal demands on the peasants of different parganas began to increase from mid 17th century onwards. The peasants of Chatsu were asked to pay a patwar cess at the rate of 10 annas per 100 rupees but the peasants declined to pay on the ground that in the past they had never paid it. Obviously, the peasants had lost their caste which was based on an appeal to custom.
Peasants of Kotla and Bawal 1646 were asked to pay an additional cess called seri at the rate of 4 ser per man (maund). Peasants of Malpura and Niwai were also forced to pay heavy tax which led to dismal and anarchy in that parganas. The famine of 1663-64 aggravated the situation. Peasants of Salawad Pargana were asked to pay two fresh taxes. Again a new tax was imposed in the pargana in 1691. Peasants of Niwai were forced to pay twice the amount of existing class in 1691. Jizya at the rate of 4 percent of the mal (land revenue) began to be collected from the cultivators of parganas of the Mughal north India. The peasants of some 40 villages were asked to pay a lump-sum Virar (levy) but refused to pay it on the ground that there was no such custom in the pargana. In 1693, the peasants of Toda Bhim complained that the revenue rates mentioned were in excess to the customary limit.

There are many more instances of fresh fiscal demands being made from peasants. The peasants of eight parganas under different jagirdars complained about their bleak economic condition due to the heavy burden of revenue demand. In order to highlight their terrible plight, they gave the example of village Akahera in Rinsi Pargana. The peasants of this village produced 16,000 mans (maunds) of grains in the Kharif season of 1665. The peasants paid 8000 mans to the jagirdar as land revenue out of this gross produce. The peasants paid other cesses totaled 4500 mans from the remaining 8000 mans. They were left only 3500 mans only. These figures clearly show that the peasants had paid 78% out of their total output as revenues to the Jagirdars.

\[
16000 \times 78 = 1248000 \div 100 \\
= 12480 \\
16000 - 12480 = 3520
\]

In the revenue literature of the period, there is clear official recognition of the widening ambit of poverty among peasants.\(^5^4\)

The Mughal Empire owed its collapse largely to the agrarian crisis which engulfed it. The massive fiscal pressure on the peasantry led to increasing indebtedness in the villages, causing peasants flights. Though the tendency to demand more from the peasant was inherent in the Jagir system, there was a conflict between the long-term interest of imperial administration and the short-term calculation of Jagirdars. The
imperial policy was to set the revenue demand to approximate to the surplus. But the individual Jagirdar, being aware of his impending transfer after 3 to 4 years, was less interested in the development of his Jagir and more concerned to maximize tax collection from the peasants. Thus, the system of Jagir transfers led to a reckless exploitation of the peasantry. The increasing burden on the peasantry began to encroach upon their means of survival. As oppression increased, the number of absconding peasants grew, sluggishness in agriculture augmented and peasants took to arms giving birth to rural uprisings of varying intensity. Consequently, the empire fell prey to the wrath of an impoverished peasantry. The apparatus of the empire which was responsible for initiating an endless process of raising revenue demand, was the first to feel the tremor of its diminishing income.55

In the words of Rekha Pande- “The revenue system evolved by the Mughals did provide stability for some time, but it was full of so contradictions that consequently it generated a series of conflicts, leading to the collapse of the system itself”.56

Peasant uprisings: Modern India

Indian peasantry has witnessed many ups and downs in its long history. There was a time in ancient and medieval history when the country experienced long battles and constant bloodshed. But these long-term disturbances did not affect our peasantry. The wars were fought by the warriors and the peasants with plough on their shoulders to the field for cultivation. Even during the feudal rule, the causes of land eviction were few and far between. But, this peaceful and quiet peasantry has now been transformed into an agitating peasantry. A.R. Desai has very rightly observed that our peasantry today are ‘up in arms’.57

Peasant movements had been a part of national movement since 1920. With the emergence of agricultural capitalism, the growth of green revolution and the spread of education along with the development of agriculture, unrest among the peasants have increased. The tribals of the country who are late comers to agriculture have also raised their head high to agitate against the government for the fulfillment of their demands. Land and agriculture is the state subject and therefore, the peasant movement is the concern of the state government. The root of peasants’ unrest, therefore, lies in the social
structure of peasantry, its history and process of agricultural modernisation. The peasants are a dominant force in the society. But unfortunately in a period of less than 40 years, 'the peasantry ceased to be a unipartite body'. Agriculture has become capitalistic and with the commercialization of agriculture and transformation in agriculture, the situation and condition of peasants has also undergone tremendous change. And this change has given birth to many peasant uprisings in India.

In 18th and 19th centuries, some major peasant movements broke out in India. Most of them by nature are tribal peasant uprisings. The most militant out-breaks in earlier or later periods, tended to be of tribal communities. This community revolted more often and far more violently than any other community including peasants in India. The term ‘tribal’ is used to distinguish people ‘so socially organised from ‘caste’ and should not convey a sense of complete isolation from the mainstream of Indian life.

The British land settlement eroded the tribal traditions of joint ownership and ended their relative isolation within the ambit of colonialism. It introduced some instruments like money-lenders, traders and mahajans which fetched the tribals within the vortex of colonial exploitation. Moreover, the influx of Christian missionaries created varied reactions among the tribals.

Demobilized soldiers and displaced peasants of Bengal led by estranged religious monks and dispossessed Zamindars were first to rise-up in the Sanyasi rebellion that lasted from 1763 to 1800. The British could curb this popular revolt only after prolonged military action. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee made this revolt famous through his novel ‘Anand Math’.

Enhanced land revenue demands, famine and economic distress goaded the Chuar indigenous tribesmen of Midnapur to take up arms. Finally it engulfed five other districts of Bengal and Bihar from 1766 to 1772 and then again from 1795 to 1816. The Ho and Munda tribesmen of Chhota-nagpur and Singbhum had their own scores to settle and they challenged the company’s forces in 1820-22, again in 1831 and thus the area remained disturbed till 1887.

Pagal-Panthis, a semi religious sect founded by Karam Shah, lived in the northern district of Bengal. Tipu, the son and successor of Karam Shah, was inspired both by religious and political motives. He took-up the cause of the tenants against the
oppressions of the Zamindars. In 1825, Tipu captured Sherpur and assumed royal power. For two decades (1813 to 1833), Tipu continued to defy the British authority for the favour of the Pagal Panthis.

The Bhils, an aboriginal tribe, lived in the Western Ghats with their strongholds in Khandesh. During 1817-1819 the Bhils revolted against their new masters, the English East India Company. Agrarian hardships and fear of the worst under the new regime were their apprehensions. Several British detachments ruthlessly crushed the revolt. However, the Bhils were far-from being pacified. Encouraged by the British reverses in the Burmese war, they again revolted in 1825 under their leader Sewaram. The unrest erupted in 1831 and again in 1846 signifying the popular character of the discontent.

The Ahom nobility in Assam accused the company's authorities of non-fulfillment of pledges of withdrawal from their territory after the conclusion of the Burmese war. The attempt of the British to incorporate the Ahoms' territory in the company's dominion and imposition of land revenue in the villages sparked off a rebellion. In 1828, they (the Ahoms) declared Gomdhar Konwar as their king and planned to march to Rangpur. The superior military power of the Company aborted the move. A second revolt was planned in 1830. The Company this time also crushed this revolt but finally in 1838 handed over Upper Assam to Purandar Singha.

The Kols of Chhota-nagpur resented the gradual extension of British authority in their soil and the transfer of soil from Kol headmen (Munda) to outsiders like Sikh and Muslim farmers. In 1831, the Kol rebels killed or burnt about a thousand outsiders. The rebellion spread to adjoining areas and orders could be resorted only after large-scale military operations.

As a result of the Burmese war, the British got possession of the Brahmaputra Valley and conceived the idea of linking up this territory with Sylhet by a road passing through the entire length of the Khashi domain. Tirat Singh, the Khasi leader, resented it and won over the support of the Garos, the Khamtis and Singphos in a bid to drive away the strangers. This revolt developed into a popular revolt but met failure in 1833.

The Fairazis were followers of a Muslim sect founded by Haji Shariatullah of Faridpur in Eastern Bengal. They advocated radical religious, social and political changes. Haji's son Dadu Mian took upon himself to expel the English intruders from
Bengal and supported the cause of the tenants against the exactions of the Zamindars. This continued from 1838 to 1857.

The Santhals, a group of tribes, are mainly agriculturists. Their massive revolt took place in 1855 – 56, covering the districts of Birbhum, Singhbum, Bankura, Hazaribagh, Bhagalpur and Monghyr in Orissa and Bihar. The Zamindars, money-lenders, traders and European employees oppressed the Santhal peasants to such an extent that there was no alternative left for them rather than to take to revolt.60 These moneylenders and Zamindars were outsider (Diku) who got the blessings of the British. Along with class exploitation there continued social torture and harassment in the Santhal region.61 Two brothers- Sidhu and Kanhu took the leadership of this revolt. But, the British crushed the revolt with iron hand. However, the Govt. pacified them by creating a separate district of Santhal Pargana.

Mention may be made of other tribal and peasant revolts like Koli disturbances in Maharashtra (1784-85), Chauri revolt in Bihar (1798), Munda rising (1820-32-37), Gond rising in Bastar (1842), Jivo Vasuo revolt in Gujarat (1850-57-58), Munda rising (1899 - 1900), Khonda Dora revolt (1900), Bhil rising in Rajasthan (1913), Bastar rising (1910), etc.

Blue revolt or Indigo revolt (1859 – 60 A.D.) was directed against the British planters who forced peasants to take advances and sign fraudulent contracts which forced the peasants to grow indigo under terms which were the least lucrative for them. The revolt began in Govindpur village in Nadia district, Bengal and was led by Digambar Biswas and Bishnu Biswas who organised the peasant into a counter force to deal with the planters lathiyals (armed retainers). In April 1860, all the cultivators of the Barasat sub-division and in the districts of Pabna and Nadia resorted to strike. They refused to sow any indigo. The strike spread to other places in Bengal. The revolt enjoyed the support of all categories of the rural population, missionaries and the Bengal intelligentsia which led to the appointment of an Indigo Commission in 1860 by the Government through which some of the abuses of indigo cultivation was removed. Din Bandhu Mitra vividly portrayed the picture of indigo planters and peasants in his famous play ‘Neel Darpan’.
In 1870, the agrarian unrest broke out in East Bengal where peasantry was oppressed by Zamindars through frequent recourse to ejection, harassment and use of force. Ratnalekha Ray writes, ‘the newly emerging village oligarchies even forcibly drove out inferior raiyats in order to get hold of more land. Having secured the lands of the expelled raiyats at a low rate on the ground of ‘desertion’, these rich villagers then employed their dependents as share croppers in order to bring the lands under cultivation again’. The Zamindars also tried to prevent them from acquiring the occupancy right under the Act of 1859. In May 1873, an Agrarian League was constituted in the Yusuf Zahi Pargana of Pabna district of East Bengal. Payment of enhanced rents was refused and the peasants fought the Zamindars in the courts. Similar leagues were formed in the adjoining districts of Bengal. The leaders of the league were Ishan Chandra Roy, Shambhu Paul and Khoodi Mullah. The unrest continued till 1885 when the Government through the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 enhanced the occupancy rights.

Maratha revolt of 1875 -78 A.D. was mainly directed against the excesses of the Marwari and Gujarati money-lenders, excessive Government land revenue demand, slump in the world cotton prices at the end of the American civil war that led to the peasant indebtedness. The peasants organised a complete social boycott of the ‘outsider’ money-lenders to compel them to accept their demands in a peaceful manner. The social boycott was soon transformed into agrarian riots when it did not prove effective. The peasants attacked the money-lenders’ houses, shops and assets. Their chief targets were the bond documents, deeds and decrees that the moneylenders held against them. By June 1875, nearly a thousand of peasants were arrested and the revolt was completely crushed. The Government appointed Riots Commission to enquire into the causes of the uprising. The ameliorative measure passed was the Agriculturists Relief Act of 1879 which put restrictions on the operations of the peasants’ land and prohibited imprisonment of the peasants of the Deccan for failure to repay debts to the money-lenders.

Rural indebtedness and the large scale alienation of agricultural land to non-cultivating classes led to the peasant unrest in Punjab. The land Alienation Act of 1900 prohibited the sale and mortgage of lands from peasants to money-lenders. The Punjab peasants were given partial relief against oppressive incidence of land revenue demand by the Government and it was not to exceed 50% of the annual rental value of land.
British attempts to hike the land revenue in temporarily settled ryotwari areas provoked rural protests in 1861 and 1893-94 at Phulaguri, Rangia, Lachima and Patharughat of erstwhile Nowgong, Kamrup and Darrang districts of Assam province. But the attempts of the peasants were dashed to the ground and ultimately met decisive fiasco at the hands of the colonial government.

The peasantry on the Indigo plantations in Champaran of Bihar was oppressed by the European planters. They were forced to grow indigo and sell it at prices fixed by the planters. Gandhiji along with Rajendra Prasad investigated the real condition of the peasants and taught them the virtue of Satyagraha. The district officials ordered him to leave Champaran but Gandhiji defied the order. Later, the government appointed an Enquiry Committee (June, 1917) with Gandhiji as one of the members. The Champaran Agrarian Act freed the peasants from the imposts levied by the Indigo planters. Regarding the nature of punishment to the peasants by the government, Rajendra Prasad describes: ‘Peasants were forced to embrace a neem tree with both hands tied together. On such occasions, the planters used to be present on the scene. On the other hand, the red ants on the tree would bite the man tied to the tree, but he could do nothing as his hands were tied’.63

The Kheda campaign was mainly directed against the government. In 1918, crops failed in the Kheda district of Gujarat but the government refused to remit land revenue and insisted on its full collection. Gandhiji along with Ballabh Bhai Patel supported the peasants and advised them to withhold payments of revenue till their demands for its remission was met. The Satyagraha lasted till June, 1918. However, the government had to concede the just demands of the peasants.

In the post-first World War period, peasant movements were started in Rae-Bareilly and Faizabad districts of Uttar Pradesh where the condition of the peasants was really appalling. Most of the peasants did not possess any rights and were treated as serfs and tenants and their plight was indeed miserable. Even the Royal Commission of Agriculture observed that there was far more pauperism in the United Provinces than in other Indian provinces. In 1920 – 21, the failure of the crops encouraged the peasants of Rae Bareilly and Faizabad districts to organise a revolt against oppression. The peasants not only rose against Taluqders but also thought of defying the British rule which had
imposed these Taluqdars on them. However, the British crushed the peasant movement by using all types of violence methods.

In late 1932 and early 1933, a popular rising broke out in the region of Mewat in north central India. Although this occurred in opposition to the political power of the princely states of Alwar and Bharatpur, as a peasant revolt it spread over and was supported from areas of British India. According to Harold Laski, ‘it was not merely an instance of peasant rebellion in an area of indirect British rule’. Popular protest in Mewat arose within the totality of an historical context made up as much of developments in British India as of features that were specific to areas of indirect rule.  

In August 1921, peasants’ discontent erupted in the district of Malabar of Kerala. It was more revolutionary than the Tebhaga of Bengal since the latter only sporadically used violence whereas Moplah organised a full-scale rebellion. Their grievances related to lack of any security of tenure, renewal fees, high rents and other oppressive landlord exactions. In 1920, the Khilafat movement took over the tenants’ rights agitation after the Congress Conference held at Manjeri in April, 1920. The arrest of the established leaders of the Congress and the Khilafat Movement left the field clear for the radical leaders. In the first stage of the rebellions, the Moplahs sacked the police stations, looted government treasuries and destroyed the records of debts and mortgages in the courts and registries. Soon, the British declared Martial Law and thus wanted to curb this. Unfortunately, the movement acquired a communal colour and the rebels killed about 500 Hindus, sacked about 100 temples, and forcibly converted 2500 Hindus to Islam. The movement was suppressed by December-1921.

Rampa revolt took place in the Eastern Ghats in Jeypore on the borders of Narsipatam Taluk in 1922-24. Alluri Sitarama Raju provided its leadership. He could not bear the sufferings of these people who were exploited by the forest and excise officials and appealed to the authorities to adopt more humane attitude. The people of the area were not allowed to carry on jungle cultivation and were forced to pay various kinds of dues which posed a serious threat to their traditional mode of life. When he was convinced that justice could not be procured through appeals, he gave a call for spontaneous rising. The response was so favourable that it soon developed into a violent revolt and government then resorted to most brutal policy towards them and killed a large
number of Koya and Savara people. Raju and other leaders were killed and remaining was sent to jail. The revolt was ‘as more revolutionary or radical than the Kisan Sabha movement in coastal Andhra which organised wide sections of peasants including tenants and agricultural labourers’.  

Enhancement of land revenue by 22% in the district of Bordoli of Gujarat by the British government led to the organization of a ‘No revenue campaign’ by the peasants of Bordoli under the leadership of Ballabh Bhai Patel. The Bordoli movement of 1928 which demonstrated heroic non-violent resistance electrified the entire country and inspired the peasants all over the country. Unsuccessful attempts of the British to suppress the movement by large scale attachment of cattle and land resulted in the appointment of an Enquiry Committee. The enquiry conducted by Maxwell and Broomfield came to the conclusion that the increase had been unjustified and reduced to 6.03%.

The Tebhaga Movement which started in North Bengal and gradually engulfed the districts of East Bengal found its natural way to the Barak Surma Valley due to its geographical continuity and ethno-linguistic affinity as well as similarity in the nature of peasants’ problems which attracted the attention of peasant leaders of Bengal to unite the peasants to a common cry of Tebhaga. The Tebhaga in Bengal offered the most formidable blow to the foundation of the colonial state and hastened up the British exodus from Indian territory. It was the first politically organised mass peasant revolt led by the Communist Party as well as the Kisan Sabha. In September 1946, the Bengal provincial Kisan Sabha gave a call to implement the Floud Commission’s recommendation of 2/3 share of the crops (Te-bhaga) instead of half, even less, for the share-cropper on land rented from Jotedars. The revolt was against the Jotedars, not against the colonial state. Like most successful movements in Indian history, Tebhaga also had a spread which even its organizers failed to record. The course of Te-bhaga is known to have erupted in North Bengal and then spread to certain parts of Eastern Bengal. It erupted with equal intensity and perhaps for longer period than Bengal in certain parts of North East India like Goalpara and Cachar.

Dewan C.P. Rasmawamy Iyer in January, 1946 announced an ‘American-model’ constitution with assemblies elected by universal suffrage but an executive controlled by
a Dewan appointed by the Maharaja. The ambitious Dewan was clearly working for an independent Travancore under his own control when the British left. While the State Congress was willing to a compromise with Ramaswamy Iyer, the Communist launched a massive campaign with the slogan ‘throw the American model into the Arabian Sea’. From September 1946, the state government began an all-out campaign against the Communist and trade unions with police camps, mass-arrests and brutal torture in jails. Conservative estimates speak of about 800 killed in this bloody rising. The massacre prevented any alliance with between the totally discredited Dewan and the Congress though the latter was careful next year to bring about the integration of Travancore with India ‘blocking the road towards Balkanisation’. According to Mridula Mukharjee, strictly speaking, it was not a peasant movement otherwise the similarities with Patiala and Telengana.

Telengana peasant uprising 1947 – 51 A. D. was launched in Andhra Pradesh against the former Nizam of Hyderabad. The agrarian social structure in Nizams’ Hyderabad was of feudal order - Ryotwari and Jagirdari. The causes of this movement are exploitation of the Jagirdars and the big peasants (Jagirdars and Deshmukh) and slavery system (Bhagela system). The Bhagela was required to serve the landlord for generations. Moreover, the poor peasants did not get irrigation facility. As a result of growing land alienation many actual cultivators were being reduced to tenants-at-will, share-croppers or landless labourers. The Telengana rising did not erupt over-night. It took about three to four decades. Actually, till 1930, the poor condition of the peasants had reached its culmination. There was enough discontent among the lower-strata of peasantry. They were only waiting for some opportunity to engineer insurrection. It was engineered by Communist Party of India. However, the movement had to be withdrawn after receiving a death-blow at the hands of the police. According to Mridula Mukherjee, in Telengana it was the landlords’ attempts to use armed hoodlums to break peasants’ resistance. In many ways, the movement was most radical and revolutionary of Indian peasant movements.

Peasant struggle in Naxalbari 1967 was launched in March- April, 1967. The Tebhaga of 1946 had acted as its torch-bearer. The chief aim of this insurrection was to alter the entire society, not merely the condition of peasants. The ideology of Naxalbari
movement was highly charged by the ideology of violence. The idiom of the movement was that the power comes from the barrel of the gun, not by slogans and non-violence. The total annihilation of the big farmers, landlords and the Jagirdars were the aims of the movement. Naxalbari is a police sub-station in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. It is in the name of the police sub-station that the movement is known all over the world. At later stage, it took an ideological flavour. It was essentially a movement launched by share-croppers. In the beginning, the movement was restricted to Khoribari, Naxalbari and Phanisidewa, having a population of about one lakh. The Rajbansis are the most preponderant community of the region. In the process of political development which took place in the Terai region, the Rajbansis acquired larger portion of land and came to be known as Jotedar- a peasant proprietor. Below them were small farmers- adhiars who cultivated land on equal share basis. Under this system, cultivators were reduced to the status of a share cropper who suffered exploitation and succumbed to bondage. The Naxalbari movement was basically against the big farmers- Jotedars. Albeit, there was no immediate gain of the struggle; it apparently influenced the course of peasant movement in the country. It was a specific struggle ideologically oriented to Marxian socialism.\(^{74}\)

The Krishi Rakshak Sangha, the peasant organization of the Patels of Mehsana district of Gujarat, blocked roads and railways and fought pitched battles with the police. They also demanded better prices for groundnut and milk.

In Maharashtra which abounds in the production of onion and sugarcane, Sharad Joshi has been leading an independent agitation in the Nasik–Pune region of Maharashtra. His movement of peasants took off in 1977-78. The peasants mobilized as a group to effect change in the face of resistance. Sharad Powar of Maharashtra with the alliance of other six parties took out a long march from Jalgaon to Nagpur with a peasant strength of 8000.

In Tamilnadu, Narayan Swamy organised the peasants under the form of Tamilnadu Agriculturists Association in December, 1983. His demands included a hike in Paddy Prices, writing off loans and remunerative prices for produce. The movement started by the peasants of Karnataka demanded a hike in support of price of jowar and maize.
The peasants of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have also expressed their grievances against the increase in the price of input. Movement in the pattern of Nasik was launched by cane growers in both the states. Their demands included a fair share in the crops grown on the land owned by Mahants.

Indian Peasant movements & many minds

There is lot of controversy among the scholars regarding the extent of the peasant uprising in India. Barrington Moore Jr. is of the opinion that the Indian peasant uprisings have been very weak in comparison to the Chinese peasant uprisings. He attributes the weakness of the Indian peasant uprisings to the caste system with its hierarchical divisions among villagers and to the strength of bourgeois leadership against landlords and the British. Kathlene Gough does not agree to this view. She conducted a survey and discovered 77 revolts. 34 of these were solely or partly by Hindus which caused her to doubt that the caste system has seriously impeded peasant uprisings in the time of trouble.75

Prof. Bipan Chandra has also admitted the limited character of the peasant uprising in India during the 19th century. He says ‘at no stage did the peasant uprising and popular uprisings of the 19th century threaten British supremacy over India. Their anger was often directed against the indigo planters, the Zamindars or the money-lenders. But they also stoutly resisted the British efforts to bolster the colonial agrarian structure in the name of maintaining law and order.76 We are too feeble to understand the peasant uprising due to the paucity of the authentic source materials. There are hardly any records of the details of peasant resistance to the British colonialism. It is again complicated as most of the peasant uprisings have been listed as acts of lawlessness and robbery in the official records. Often they are also stated as ‘communal riots’ between the major religious cults or activities of ‘criminal castes and tries’.

Based on methods of organisation, goals and ideology, Kathlene Gough has classified peasant uprisings in the following five categories- Viz- Mass insurrections for the redress of particular grievances; Social banditry; Terrorist revolt with ideas of meeting out collective justice; Restorative revolts to drive out the British and restore
earlier system and rule; and Religious revolts for the emancipation of a religion or an ethnic group under a new form of government.

The peasants organised certain mass insurrections with a view to seeking redress of a particular vengeance. These mass insurrections were spontaneous, sporadic, and sudden and lacked the religious or ideological basis. They often started in a peaceful manner but assumed violent shape in the face of policy of oppression resorted to by the authorities. The chief factors which led to these risings were economic deprivation and exploitation due to British policy and exactions by the landlords and money-lenders. The repeated out-breaks of peasant struggles against the tax policy of the colonial government the Raij mels of 1861, 1868 and 1893-94 as well as the Jayantia people’s war of resistance in 1861-63 were in line with broadly similar peasant and tribal revolts in many parts of India.\textsuperscript{77}

**Peasant-uprisings of India: Some observations**

After studying the different peasant insurrections during the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries, we find that there was a growing consciousness among the Indian peasants to emancipate themselves from the oppression of money-lenders and Zamindars. It also convinced them that the organised power of the government also solidly stood behind them and they had to exert necessary pressure on the government before they could achieve anything substantial. Another feature of these uprisings was that they were sporadic and spontaneous and in no way aimed at ending the British supremacy over India.\textsuperscript{78}

The insurrections also contributed to the founding of the Indian National Congress. The massive fights put up by the peasants shook the confidence of the British in their ability to hold on to their dominion in India. Scaring that the small bands of discontented peasants in different parts of their Empire would coalesce with each other and assume the shape of a national revolt. A.O. Hume, motivated by these considerations, took a lead and initiated action for the formation of the Indian National Congress.

The peasant uprisings of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century unlike the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century lead us to the following observations: The leadership of the peasant uprisings of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century rests with the left-oriented political parties. The objective of these parties is to gain
political power by mobilizing the peasant masses as their support base. The peasant uprisings in the 20th century in different parts of India are rooted in the process of modernization. Their leadership is provided by the Kulak peasants, rich peasants and the boggy of ex-jagirdars and Zamindars. The struggles are mobilized to fulfil the vested interest of better-off segments of the country. The struggles of the peasants are not the struggles of the deprived and relentlessly exploited landless labourers or untouchables; it is the localized caste-based rural resurgence. It also reveals that the demands of the peasant uprisings revolve round the interest of the rich peasants. Finally, it may be argued that the present-day ills of the country manifesting themselves in poverty, famine, unemployment and economic inflation can be wiped out only through peasant-based revolution.

III

Peasant Movements in global perspective:

While dealing with the nature and basic traits of the peasant movements in ancient, medieval and modern India we have come across several instances projecting the impact of peasant movement in other countries beyond the jurisdiction of Indian Territory. Hence it is an endeavor to present a brief note about the peasant movements in ancient world.

The year 579 saw a major peasant insurrection which was directed against the rule of the Merovingian King Chilperich, in the course of which many peasants in the vicinity of Limoges left their holdings to escape excessive tax burdens. Tax collectors were threatened with death by the infuriated mob. So, at the end military force was used to stop the rebellion.

The biggest peasant rebellion in Carolingian times occurred in 841 when the peasants of Stellinga in Saxony protested against the Frankish type of feudal rule. In Saxony which had only recently been subjugated by the Frankish rulers, the process of feudalization was much slower than in the other provinces of the Frankish Empire. Therefore, the conventional social structure of nobles, freemen and half-free survived longer in Saxony than elsewhere in the Empire. The position of freemen and half-free who had fought most persistently against the Frankish conquerors, had deteriorated
markedly with the invasion of the Franks and the introduction of their rule. Encouraged by open dissent among the sons of King Louis 'the Pious', the Saxon freemen and half-free arose in a big rebellious movement between 841 and 843. This Stellinga movement encompassed both dependent and free peasant groups and was primarily directed against lay and ecclesiastical manorial lords whose position had improved since the Frankish conquest to the detriment of the pleasantry. It took King Louis and the Saxon nobility several extremely violent campaigns to suppress the insurrection, which had spread over large parts of Saxony.

Peasant resistance against the heavy demands of the manorial lords grew in the medieval period with the rise of urban centre and the intensive development of landed resources. The frequent disputes of peasants with their lords concerning rights to woodlands and pastures lasted for several years. In 1210, a conflict was finally settled concerning the use of the woodlands between the monastery of Salem and the peasants of Oberzell, a village to the north of Lake Constance, which had lasted for several years. It had escalated particularly in 1198 when the inhabitants of Oberzell devastated a farm of the monastery at Adelsreute, an action for which they were sentenced to heavy punishment. A conflict which was also related to the use of the commons was recorded between the abbey of Himmerode and a number of its villages. It was above all the peasants of Dudeldorf, Pickliessem and Gindorf who felt defrauded of their traditional right to use a large stretch of woodland. As a result, they attacked a farm belonging to the monastery, seized its cattle and threw stones at the lay servants of the monastery. It was only after the inhabitants of the villages concerned were faced with the possibility of being excommunicated that in 1228 a compromise between the conflicting parties was reached which put an end to the aggression on both sides. Similar struggles between assertive peasant communities and manorial lords who tried to restrict their rights to the commons were also recorded in many other regions during the 13th century. The number of conflicts grew as arable land became scarce with the intensified development of land resources- a trend which incited many feudal lords to try and raise their revenues by limiting peasant rights to the commons.

In the 13th and 14th centuries peasants communities clashed with ambitious rulers especially in the Alpine Provinces and along the Coastlines of the North sea where the
rural population had fought hard to obtain a relatively independent social position and far-reaching autonomy in communal matters. In the 13th century, peasant insurrections and even long peasant wars shook particularly such regions as Drente, West and East Frisia, the stedingerland and Dithmarschen. The insurrection of Stedingers was one of the most impressive peasant revolts of the medieval ages. The Stedinger communities in the lower Weser area waged a major war against the Archbishops of Bremen and the Counts of Oldenburg in an effort to preserve their freedom. Yet although they fought for years, they were not as successful and the Frisians eventually lost against the combined forces of their enemies.79

The Flemish revolt lasted for several years from 1323 to 1328. The principal targets of this revolt were lay manorial lords and administrative abuses by tax collectors and administrative officials. The centres of the revolt were the coastal areas of Flanders where the peasants had won considerable independence in the high middle ages. It started in the vicinity of Bruges during the winter of 1323 and was at first directed against the excesses of the judicial authorities who charged taxes and court fees in an arbitrary manner. The struggle against these individual abuses soon developed into a universal protest of assertive peasant communities who held much more far-reaching goals. In their rage, the rebels launched their assaults mainly on the castles of the nobility, which were often pillaged and destroyed in the course of revolt. Without meeting any serious opposition, the revolt soon affected the entire province and found the support of all towns except Ghent. The office-holders of the courts were replaced by representatives from the peasant estate, who maintained the normal administration for years. The decisive blow against the rebels eventually came from an army sent by the King of France at the request of the Count of Flanders. After a big battle near Cassel in 1328, the Flemish peasant army was forced to surrender to the French Knights and this defeat marked the final collapse of the insurrection.80

The Jacquerie of 1358, which was essentially a revolt caused by peasant destitution, was unique because of its surprising geographical spread over a very small time-span. Heavy tax demands, the vast devastation of the country as a result of the hundred years’ war and innumerable lootings by impoverished mercenaries had driven the defenceless peasantry to despair. Faced with the wretchedness and insecurity of their
condition, the peasants were allowed to form their own defence-units to repulse the assaults of vagrant mercenary gangs. In the last days of May 1358, an open insurrection started in the Beauvais region which soon spread into Picardy and other neighbouring areas. In many places, the rebellious peasant troops, which for the most part operated independent of each other, forced procrastinating individuals to join them. Great bitterness was felt towards nobility which only pursued its own interests and often participated in pillaging the countryside rather than protecting the peasants and their villages. Hence the peasants answered with destruction of many castles and mansions, often driving away the owners. Most towns, however, were undecided and only a few of them were active supporters of the revolt. It was soon plain that the insurrection was highly spontaneous in character and lacked a political perspective, for it collapsed after a few months despite its vast geographical extent.\textsuperscript{81}

The German peasant revolts in the late Middle Age became much more frequent in the late 14\textsuperscript{th} and 15\textsuperscript{th} centuries and had a much greater political impetus than their fore-runners. In the 14\textsuperscript{th} century, only four major peasant movements were recorded while this number increased to fifteen in the first half and then to twenty-five in the second half of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century. These revolts mainly occurred in the south of Germany.

In south-west Germany, the grave consequences of the agrarian crisis induced many lords to strengthen the ties of personal lordship over their peasants so as to prevent them from moving elsewhere as well as to compensate for losses in income by charging higher dues. But around the year 1370, a serious conflict developed between the monastery at Hauentstein and its peasants concerning the terms of serfdom which finally culminated in an insurrection. The peasants had sought to escape from the monastery by moving into towns and refusing to pay the dues connected with their status as bondsmen. After years of conflict, a legal agreement was reached in 1383 which permitted the peasants to move into those towns which acknowledged that it was legitimate for the monastery to demand the payment of heriot. In cases where a bondsman failed to obey this rule, the monastery was entitled to confiscate both his movable and immovable property.

There was scarcity of labour following the depopulation after the Black Death in England. The landowners had a lot of land in their hands which required tilling. Many
landowners had to take recourse to hired labour whereas they relied on the manorial villains before the plague. Hired labourers were at this time not abundant which put them in a very commanding position. The landlords found it difficult to cope with the situation and therefore they appealed to parliament to eradicate the problem through some form of legislation. The statute of labourers passed by parliament in 1351 sought to offer remedies in the event of the situation precipitated by the Black Death but in reality, it was an indirect attempt to give the landowners control over labourers even in the changed conditions. Indeed, the statute was highly impractical in the context of the situation that existed after the plague. In course of the implementation of the statute, there was a strong ignition as it forced the labourers to be tied to the land. Once again, labourers who fled their employers were branded as falsity. The statute of labourers was one of the instruments that provoked the peasants to revolt against the oppressive working standards. Such provocation touched its pinnacle when another oppressive poll tax was imposed on the peasants. The rising originated from an unpopular poll tax. Its oppressive and corrupt administration caused local revolts in Essex, and Kent, which became the signal for a national rebellion.82

In 1377, the Parliament imposed a poll tax of a groat or four-pence on all English people above 14 years, except beggars. Two years later, in 1379, there was an enhancement to the tax which was now increased on the wealthier nobility while a peasant was required to pay a groat as earlier. In 1380, however, the matters became worse when a new tax of three groats was imposed on all persons above fifteen, irrespective of their condition. The peasantry was incensed by this tyrannical poll tax and within months there was a consolidation of the public against it. The first outbreak of the revolt took place in Kent when one Wat Tyler murdered a tax-collector and marched to Canterbury. He headed a large group of protestors who destroyed many manorial records that came to their way. According to Trevelyan, the rebels invaded the manor houses and abbeys, extorted the right they claimed and burnt obnoxious charters and manor rolls.83

Spontaneous revolt took place in Hertfordshire and Essex. Riots started entire England and the basic demands of the rioters were the abolition of the institution of villeinage, freedom to the peasants and access to markets. One of the drawbacks of the revolt was that it took place in the towns. The Archbishop of Canterbury was murdered,
the Tower of London was looted and countless justices and manorial heads were assaulted or manhandled. Such violence did not help the peasants to arrive at their objects. The murder of Wat Tyler by London’s Mayor caused the spark for the revolt to run out. Soon Richard II, the King of England was able to quell the revolt within three weeks of Tyler’s death. The King and the Nobility did not keep the promises that they made and the abolition of villeinage was pushed further into the future.

According to Trevelyan, the rebellion had been a great incident and its history throws a good deal of light on the English folk of those days. It is controversial whether it helped or retarded the movement for the abolition of serfdom, which continued at much the same pace after 1381 as before. However, the spirit that had prompted the rising was one of the chief reasons why serfdom died out in England while it did not die out on the continent of Europe. 84

The Knight’s revolt of 1523 was followed by a peasant revolt in Germany. Leopold Von Ranke called the peasant war of 1525 as ‘the outstanding natural phenomenon in German history’. 85

The peasant class in Germany had been fully exploited and the clergy too had a share in this. The peasants had social and economic grievances and finally the religious ferment added fuel to the fire on it. As a result, the movement assumed serious proportions. Headed by fanatics, various groups of peasants freely indulged in ghastly acts of crimes. Martin Luther saw in this revolt the possibility of a danger to the Reform Movement and so, it was put down. The peasants did not like the Protestants as they suppressed their revolt with the help of the princes of German states. The medieval peasant was not a tenant in the modern sense of the term; rather he was dependent on or subject to his lord in a variety of ways. A powerful factor of peasant existence in medieval feudal society was the bondage to the feudal lord. Until German peasants were emancipated in the 19th century, majority of them depended on feudal lords who were entitled to various tributes and services. Taxes had to be paid upon marriage and death, on St. George’s and St. Martin’s Day, in Spring and in Autumn. Pathetically little remained for the peasants in years of bad harvests and even in normal years, the remaining supplies only allowed for a modest livelihood. 86
G. Franz regards each and every peasant revolt of the 14th and 15th centuries, as a precursor of the peasants' war of 1525. Even Peter Blickle, the author of the most recent comprehensive study of this event, has also endorsed this view. 87

Japan during the Tokugawa period was predominantly an agricultural country. More than 80% of the total population accepted agriculture as their principal profession. The government revenue was mainly collected from the poor peasants to maintain the government and support the idle Samurais. This led to a chronic economic distress in the country which ultimately culminated in peasant uprisings. The economic growth of the merchants was highly responsible for the deterioration of the peasants' economy. The stability of a society depends mainly upon its sound economic system. But the history of Tokugawa Period was a stay of growing dissatisfaction with economic conditions. It gradually undermined the era of stability inaugurated by the early Tokugawas. With the emergence of township and merchant community, the peasant economy met a great setback. These economic discontents found their expression in numerous peasants' uprisings in Japan. These peasants' uprising gradually gained momentum during the time of flood, drought and adverse price of commodities. No provision was made for import of food grains from other countries to relieve the starving millions at the time of the failure of crops which culminated their anger. 88

Abolition of feudalism in 1871 in Japan directly affected the farmers. The peasants were now freed from the feudal obligations and became free holders. There was also a drastic change in the system of revenue collection. During the feudal regime taxes were collected in kind according to the value of the crops and the peasants were left with no more than just enough to live on. Thus, the feudal lords were the real caretakers of the peasants in the sense that in the time of need, they used to help the peasants under their jurisdiction. But under the new government after the abolition of feudalism, the taxes were collected in cash according to the value of the land. Moreover, the peasants were not forced to stick to their land. They were at liberty either to remain on their land or sell it out and leave for the city.

The agricultural conflicts popularly known as 'Swing Riots' took place in England during 1830-31. The production of agriculture came down heavily following the Napoleonic wars and even after that. The matter was far from improving. Poor harvests
and increasing prices bitterly affected the British economy which led to labour unrest creating a complicated and difficult situation. Number of the unemployed had risen and a collective dissatisfaction found manifestation in the agricultural disorders, the first of which began in Kent in 1830. The unrest speedily spread to other areas of England. The name ‘Swing’ associated with the riots was derived from Captain Swing who led the rioters by writing anonymous letters. Loss of property and the destruction of equipment were common. About 2000 of the protestors were arrested and 19 were hanged. Though the riot was quickly curbed, it brought some issues relating to agricultural and working conditions into sharp focus and was influential in bringing the Reform Act of 1832. The Swing Riots also highlighted other social discrepancies by involving the general population in the affected areas.

The economic condition of China during the Manchu rule was partially responsible for the outbreak of Tai-Ping rebellion in China which continued from 1851 to 1864 under the leadership of Hung Hsiu-Chuan. It was basically a peasant movement. There was economic dislocation due to accumulation of land in large holdings. There was no equal distribution of land and the poor peasants, the real tillers of the soil, were put to the mercy of the landlords for a piece of land. The situation was further aggravated by the profit-mongering merchants who used to hoard food-grains in huge quantity until the price was raised abnormally. The situation was worst confounded by the increase of population. This increase of population without corresponding increase of arable land caused acute food-shortage which affected the poorer section of the people most. Large-scale importation of finished foreign goods also shattered the rural economy of China. It affected cottage industries which was subsidiary to agriculture of the local craftsmen and small traders. Another economic factor which was especially injurious to the tax payers was the sudden increase of the value of Silver in comparison to Copper. As the agricultural tax was calculated in Silver but paid in Copper, the tax-burden of the peasants increased heavily. Thus, the economic maladjustment in the country infuriated millions of poor and unprivileged who were out to join the rebellion.

The economic distress was further worsened by flood and famine in South China. The people of Kwangshi, Kwantung and Hunaoor provinces of China suffered a lot due to recurring flood which caused constant failure of crops, starvation and malnutrition broke
the morale of the people. The corrupt government machinery failed to tackle the situation to redress the minimum grievances of the hungry millions. The people came out to join the rebels in large number out of utter dejection. It made the confusion more confounded. This revolt was practically a crusade against feudalism and its aims and objects was to re-distribute land among the Chinese people, taking into consideration its productivity. The rebels attempted to dissolve the big land-holdings for improving the condition of the poor peasants. But they failed.
## Notes & References

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(See-1)


(See-16)


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